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Looking through the enemy's eyes: point-of-view editing and character identification in manga *Naruto*

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Abstract

Various cinematic traditions have influenced manga, thanks to the 'god of manga', Osamu Tezuka, who brought this revolutionary change to the creation of manga¹ in Japan. Cinematic views give artists freedom to vary angles, perspectives, and distances of shots as if they were holding a camera. They serve to direct readers' attention to specific details in order to achieve the purposes of a narrative. This paper explores how manga artists employ point-of-view editing to engage readers by broadening the range of identification with characters. The reader is positioned in a double structure of the viewer (through whom they see) and the viewed (the one under the reader's gaze). Both agents invite the reader to join their experiences in the fictional world. Thus, there is a kind of tension between the viewer and the viewed as both seem to allure the reader to identify with them. In this paper, I will draw on examples from Masashi Kishimoto's famous work, *Naruto*, and from students' responses in a case study. During the interviews with the students, I noticed that they actively imagined themselves to be in the situations of the characters. Their 'situational identification' with the characters was affected both by whom they saw and through whom they saw.

Key words: cinematic techniques, perspectives, point-of-view, identification, manga, reader, *Naruto*, engagement.

1. Introduction

There is a history of using cinematic cuts to present images in manga. Osamu Tezuka, being called ‘god of manga’, was the first person to introduce this revolutionary change to manga². Up to Tezuka’s time, manga was drawn in a theatrical approach – pictures were framed from the same repeated point of view as if from someone seated in the audience. Adopting cinematic techniques in the composition allowed Tezuka to tell his stories from different angles, distance and perspectives, which gave him advantages in depicting physical power and characters’ psychological states. This technique has been widely employed by contemporary manga artists due to Tezuka’s continuous influence. It increases the accessibility of meanings in manga because manga artists now have more ways to direct readers’ attention to the right details for narrative purposes. It also broadens the range of character identification due to the adoption of various first-person points of view. In this paper, I will draw on cinematic and literary theories to discuss the relationship between perspectives of images in manga and readers’ identification with characters.

2. Methodology

This research project was conducted by employing a qualitative approach. Sixteen students from two secondary schools in London were invited to participate in this research during May and June in 2013. The participants were selected from experienced manga readers in year seven to ten (age between ten and fifteen). Students from each school were separated into gender groups, resulting in a total of four groups for this study. Each group received three semi-structured interviews;

each student received a further semi-structured individual interview. The students were given two manga to read. One was a shōnen¹ manga, *Naruto* volume six; the other was a shōjo² manga, *Vampire Knight* volume four. Apart from these two titles, the students were asked to read one additional manga of their own choice. They were required to keep their reflections of each manga in a double-sided A4 form that I provided. The reading reflections could be done by writing or drawing alone, or in both ways. Data collected from the students was analysed using content and discourse analyses.

3. Techniques of perspectives in cinema and literature

Point-of-view editing can place the audience in different characters' positions and enable them to see through different characters' eyes. Carroll³ asserts that point-of-view editing serves the purposes of movie narration and guarantees "fast pickup and a high degree of accessibility to mass untutored audiences" (p. 134). In other words, point-of-view editing makes films easy to access and to engage with. By aligning the audiences' views with the actor's, the movie director attempts to blur the boundary between the actor and the audience. The audience may feel as if they were in the same place as the character, or even as if they had taken on the role of the character. I call this 'situational identification' to distinguish it from 'ideological identification' with which the audience projects themselves on the character whom becomes their alter ego.

'Situational identification' occurs during the vicarious experiences that the audience gains from conflating their own space and subjectivity with the character's. Such experiences feel like an illusion that can easily cease when the

¹ Shōnen is a Japanese term for boys.

² Shōjo is a Japanese term for girls.

film is over. The ‘ideological identification’, however, usually requires the audience to find relevance between them and the character, and to judge the credibility and reliability of the character. The audience who agrees with the character’s moral ethics or actions may identify with the character. What differentiates ‘ideological identification’ from ‘situational identification’ is that it stays after the film is finished. The audience feels that the character is able to represent part of their real or ideal selves. The two types of identification do not conflict or exclude each other. The audience can form ‘ideological identification’ with one character, whilst the camera aligns their views with another character’s, and therefore induce ‘situational identification’ which makes the audience feel as if they had taken on the identity of this character. In this paper, I will focus on ‘situational identification’ with characters that manga readers experience through reading and viewing the story from various characters’ points of view.

Discussions of perspectives in literature often involve character identification. A novel of first-person narration invites the reader to identify with the narrator through whom the reader sees and feels. *Focalization* is the literary device that works through perspectives. It limits the information that is allowed to reach the reader. A first-person narrator may be a *focalizing* character (the one that tells the story) through whose eyes and mind the reader experiences the character’s world⁴. The focalizing character is capable of evoking ‘situational identification’ in readers because they experience the fictional world through this character’s viewpoint as if through their own. It is possible to have more than one focalizing character in a story. Yannicopoulou⁵ uses the term *variable internal focalization* to describe this mechanism of a narrative. Stories that adopt *variable internal focalization* do not limit readers to one character’s point of view, but expose them to several characters’

interests. Such a mechanism allows readers to form ‘situational identification’ with various characters by experiencing the story through their eyes. However, when it comes to the development of ‘ideological identification’, readers have to judge the reliability of each focalizing character and to decide which character(s), if any, to trust, and perhaps further to identify with as their alter ego.

4. Techniques of perspectives in manga

Reader-character identification, however, is more complicated when it comes to the reading of manga. There is not only variable internal focalization working in the verbal narrative, but also the disembodied camera’s point of view through which the visual narrative is constructed. As manga stories are based on dialogue, they are told by at least two focalizing characters. Each interlocutor is given a chance to present his or her vision from within, and to draw readers to identify with him or her. A sense of intimacy may develop between the speakers (the focalizing characters) and the listeners (the readers) due to the characters’ disclosure of their secrets, thought and emotions.⁶

The tradition of employing cinematic editing in presenting pictures in manga complicates readers’ experiences of identification with characters as the disembodied camera also takes on a perspective through whom readers see whatever happens in this fictional world. The disembodied camera may take on a character’s point of view or an omniscient point of view. Whichever it is, the reader has to read through two perspectives at a time, one from the verbal text and one from the visual – each tells a story according to the narrator’s interests.

A cinematic device, *reverse-angle shot*, can be used to explain how this

double-dimensional perspective works. A *reverse-angle shot* is a cinematic device that alternates the camera's perspective between two interlocutors⁷. Normally the shots are taken from the point of view of the listener. The spectator is positioned as the listener whilst the speaker on the screen tells his or her story. Thus, a filmic story is told by two agents, the character who speaks on the screen and the character (or an omniscient narrator) who sees through the camera. The audience is placed in two imagined positions at the same time. Browne⁸ argues that identification³ in a filmic experience implicates the spectator in the positions of both the one seeing and the one being seen. This is a double structure of viewer and viewed. The double alignment broadens the range of identification that is available for the spectator to take on during the viewing of the film.

A similar experience can be gained from the reading of manga. The viewer (whose viewpoint is followed by the disembodied camera) attempts to incite 'situational identification' in readers, whilst the viewed (the character perceived in the picture) may beg readers for empathy by telling his or her stories and displaying his or her feelings in a visual form. The viewed is capable of evoking both 'situational identification' and 'ideological identification' in readers. He or she speaks directly to readers as if he or she is a real person. 'Situational identification' happens in this vicarious experience. However, the beliefs that the viewed character holds or the actions he or she performs can also evoke 'ideological identification' when readers agree with the character. Thus, there is tension between the viewer and the viewed character as the former intends to make

³ Browne defines identification as the experience of imagining oneself in a character's position without necessarily having to share the same experience.

the reader displace his or her subjectivity in the character, whilst the latter tries to ‘seduce’ the reader to give empathy and identification.

5. Readers’ experiences of character identification in *Naruto* volume 6

I have argued that the technique of point-of-view editing in manga serves to engage readers by providing them with a vicarious experience. It allows the audience to see through a character’s eyes (whose viewpoint is followed by the disembodied camera); in the meanwhile, it invites them to respond to the viewed character that is under the viewer character’s/ the reader’s gaze. The tension between the viewer character and the viewed character made the students that I interviewed experience character identification in different ways.

Page 164 in *Naruto* volume 6 (Image 1) shows that the artist varies the disembodied camera’s perspectives between the two characters to place readers in their positions.

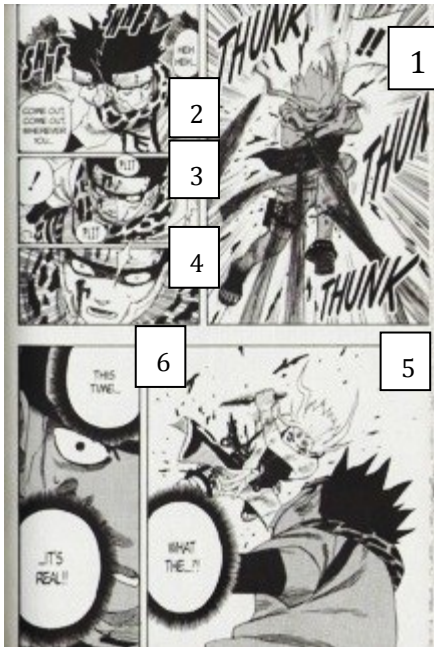


Image 1 – Kishimoto, M. (1999) *Naruto* vol. 6, p. 164.⁹

Travis: You get to see [it] from [the] enemy's perspective [...] Sakura is almost like the hero in this one [panel 1]. Here is the good side, that's the bad side. You get to see from the enemy's point of view. That's the narrator's view. You can see everything. She just looks like that [panel 5]. But this [panel 6] shows that you're looking through the enemy's eyes, what the enemy would see. It helps you imagine, like, 'Wow! That's what it would look like. She's coming at me!' Yes.

Interviewer: Right, how does that make you feel?

Travis: It makes you feel more inside the story.

[.....]

Arthur: Yeah, it's like you are Sakura basically, and you are coming towards the enemy and the enemy is looking right at you [panel 2-4].

Travis: It gives you both points.

(GB Group interview 1)

Travis seemed to be in a detached position when he interpreted the first and the fifth panels. However, when it came to the last panel, the extreme close shot reinforced the enemy's emotions, which incited Travis to respond with his own emotions as if he were the character in shock of the coming danger. Whilst he was very clear about the position of the viewer in the first and the fifth panels, he seemed to be confused by whom he was looking at and through whom he was seeing when he interpreted the sixth panel. He did not seem to realise that he was looking 'at' the enemy as a reader through Sakura's point of view rather than 'through' the enemy's. By saying that he was looking through the enemy, Travis placed himself in this character's position and interpreted this picture as if he were one of the participants in this battle. It shows that the viewed (the enemy in the picture) foregrounded Travis' experience of character identification here whilst the subjectivity of the viewer (Sakura through whom Travis saw the enemy) receded. On the contrary, Arthur identified with the viewer (Sakura) when he interpreted the second to the fourth panels. The two students' reading experiences of this page show the tension between the viewer character and the viewed character as both

attempt to invite readers to identify with them.

Wesley's interpretation of the same page shows that a reader may form 'situational identification' with more than one character as the perspectives of pictures change from one panel to another. His absorption into the characters can be noted from the frequent use of 'we' in this quote:

Um, the way in this one, it shows how we are on his side. We're like, we're in his shoes [panel 2-4]. [It] show[s] how scared we are, and that it shows that we've got, we've got him that way. We are kind of excited, but then next, you really know, we're gonna get killed [...] [panel 5], but then you realise afterwards, like, the tension, after when you read it, like, "Oh, someone is on top of me." But then you realise [that] it wasn't you, because of the way he [the manga artist] shows it.

(Wesley, AB Group interview 1)

Wesley's reading of panel 2 to 5 shows that he shifted his situational identification with the enemy to Sakura, and then back to the enemy. Finally, his own subjectivity awoke and detached him from both of the characters. As Wesley's attention was directed to the enemy's facial expression in panel 4, he was drawn to respond with the same feeling because of emotional contagion. It then made him feel as if he were the character, feeling scared of Sakura. The subsequent panel shows both characters through an omniscient narrator's point of view. The viewer (Sakura) of the previous shot/panel now joins the viewed (the enemy). Both characters are exposed to examination by the reader. Instead of continuing to see himself as the enemy, Wesley's identification with the characters became

inconsistent.

Firstly, he displaced his subjectivity in Sakura and therefore felt the excitement of being about to catch the enemy. Perhaps due to the reading direction (up to down) that guided his eyes from Sakura to the enemy, he turned to identify with the enemy shortly after. Moreover, the low-angle-shot that was taken from behind the enemy placed Wesley in the position of this character, and thus stitched his subjectivity to the enemy's, making him feel as if he were about to be killed. However, seeing both characters in the picture made him realise that the disembodied camera had taken up an omniscient narrator's point of view, and that he was not seeing through any of these characters' eyes. This recognition freed him from the illusion of being someone else. He realised that he was a 'voyeur' after all, who observed rather than participated.

6. Conclusion

Statements from interviews with these students show that both the viewer and the viewed are capable of drawing readers to identify with them. When the camera takes up a character's point of view, readers see through the character's eyes as if seeing through their own. It gives readers vicarious experiences and evokes 'situational identification' with the characters. However, it is possible that the reader does not identify with the viewer but the viewed who speaks directly to the reader and begs the reader for empathy. Thus, cinematic editing in manga positions readers in a double structure of the viewer and the viewed. Both agents attempt to draw readers' identification by telling stories according to their own interests. The reader may experience a sense of intimacy with the characters when imagining himself or herself to be one of them, to participate in the story. A wide range of

identification with various characters can occur during the reading of manga because of various first-person narrators both in words and pictures. Thus, the technique of point-of-view editing allows manga artists to engage readers by placing them in characters' positions all the time, and making them feel as if they were 'there' experiencing what the characters go through. Such a reading experience can be highly engaging and imaginative.

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